

ELIZABETH ADISESHIAH

2026

Elizabeth Adiseshiah Memorial Lecture

WOMEN AND WORK: THE MISSING ENGINE OF INDIA'S DEVELOPMENT

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Organized by

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Kanika Mahajan

Development as economic freedom

Among women aged 25-60 in rural areas who have completed education, the labor-force participation rate (FLFP) dropped sharply from 54% in 1980 to 31% in 2017 (National Sample Survey (1980) and Periodic Labor Force Survey (2017), author's own calculations). In the last seven years it has bounced back, and now stands at almost 50%. Male employment rates, by contrast, declined only slightly, from 96% to 94 percent, and had reverted to their previous level by 2023. In urban areas, the FLFP has been static at 25%, with a recent uptick to almost 30% while that for males stands at around 92% with some fluctuations (Gulati et al., 2025).

While there is some debate around whether the estimated decline was an artifact of changes in data collection quality or a reflection of reality, India's female labor force participation remains low and the gender gap large by international standards. According to the World Bank's modelled (ILO) series, the female labor force participation rate of women aged 15 and above in India stood at about 32.8% in 2024, against a world average of close to 51% across 176 countries (World Bank, 2025). In fact, India sits among the lowest-ranked economies in the world on this measure, rivalled only by a few economies in the Middle East and North Africa. Despite the increase in recent years, we perform poorly in this important aspect, even in comparison to our close peers. India continues to lag behind several lower-middle-income comparators,

including Bangladesh (37%), the Philippines (47.2%), and Vietnam (68.5%) (World Bank Gender Data Portal, 2023).

It is important to move the Indian economy from a low-female-employment equilibrium to one in which women's work becomes productive and valued, for India's long-term prosperity and also equality of access to opportunities across gender. Amartya Sen viewed development as the removal of major sources of unfreedom (Sen, 1999). Women's economic exclusion is one such unfreedom. It restricts autonomy, reduces household resilience, weakens intergenerational investments, and deprives the economy of talent. Yet it is also a constraint that markets do not automatically remove. India's experience shows that growth and education, while necessary, are not sufficient. The central question, therefore, is why rising educational attainment among women has not translated into higher employment.

Women face multiple constraints: inside the home, outside the home, and inside the workplace. This also means that no single lever—skilling, care work, safety, quotas, firm incentives, or legal reform—can solve the problem alone. Along with asking why women are not willing to supply labor to the market, we must also ask why the economy does not create enough jobs that women can and want to take up.

The education-employment paradox

In India, the education story has changed dramatically. The Ministry of Education's AISHE 2021-22 release reports that female higher-education enrolment rose from 1.6 crore in 2014-15 to 2.1 crore in 2021-22, and that the female gross enrolment ratio in higher education reached 28.5, slightly above the male rate, with a gender parity index above one since 2017-18 (Ministry of Education, 2024). Parity has effectively been achieved across all

levels of school education, from primary to higher secondary. Among today's youth, young women are as likely as young men to complete secondary and tertiary education. This is a remarkable social transformation.

Yet this near-parity in human capital coexists with a yawning gap in employment rates. Even among women with a college degree only about 41% were in the labor force. This mismatch is particularly stark among young urban educated women. Urban women aged 20-24 face unemployment of about 29 percent, compared with about 20% for men, and among urban women aged 20-24 with at least a college degree, unemployment is about 40% (own calculations, PLFS, 2023). Research documents that unemployed women spend longer periods seeking or being available for jobs than unemployed men (Fletcher et al., 2019). These facts are critical: while we push to raise women's labor supply by removing the constraints that restrict it, many educated women are not absent because they lack aspirations. They are absent because search is long, costly, unsafe, socially contested, and bound by societal expectations.

The official surveys themselves register this latent willingness. Among women usually engaged in domestic duties, about 34% in rural areas and 28% in urban areas reported that they would accept work if it were made available at the household premises, and the overwhelming majority of these women preferred regular work, frequently on a part-time basis (Chaudhary and Verick, 2014). The constraint, in other words, is less the desire to work than the kind of work on offer and the distance to it.

Education, moreover, is not the same as employable skills, and here the gender gap is stark. Indian women are roughly half as likely as men to have received any vocational or skill training. Only

about a tenth of women had received such training, against around a fifth of men. We document that skilling materially narrows the gender employment gap—there is an 8.3 percentage-point employment gap between skilled and unskilled women—and that, conditional on working, skilled women earn about 27% more than women with no training, partly because training channels them towards salaried, formal-sector jobs (Afridi et al., 2024b). While expanding years of schooling is necessary, but without skills aligned to the jobs the economy is actually creating, education may not convert into employment.

What about the recent increase in FLFP? Is education playing some role? The recent rise in women's participation should not be dismissed, but it should be interpreted carefully. In rural India the rise in FLFP has been the highest for women with primary education or less (increase by almost 80%) followed by those having secondary or higher secondary education (by almost 60%). This is not surprising given that almost 75% of the post-2017 increase in rural FLFP up to 2023 has come from agriculture, followed by manufacturing and services at about 10% each.

In urban India, FLFP increased by almost 50% both among women with at most primary education and among those who had completed secondary or higher secondary education, while it rose by only 4 percentage points, or 10%, among women with a college degree. In terms of sectoral composition of the increase, around 60% of the increase in urban India has come from services, followed by manufacturing at 22%.

On the other hand, the increase for rural males has come from services and construction, at almost half each, while agriculture has fallen. In urban India too, the increase for men has come from services followed by construction, while manufacturing has fallen.

Thus, the sectoral sources of the increase are disparate for the two genders. This raises the question beyond the binary of working and not working.

In what follows, I organise the evidence around two questions. I first examine the supply-side factors that shape whether women are willing and able to offer their labor to the market, and I then turn to the demand-side determinants that govern whether the economy generates jobs that women can, and want to, take up.

Supply-side constraints: norms, home production, safety, and search

In India, women's labor supply decisions are embedded in the household. Supply-side factors—particularly changing household demographics, including rising educational attainment among married women and male household members, along with increasing household income—fully account for the decline in female workforce participation between 1987 and 1999. However, for the subsequent period, 1999-2011, these factors explain only between 14% and, at most, half of the observed decline. The fall is driven by the U-shaped relationship between women's education and employment, together with the negative association between women's employment and the education or income of male household members (Afridi et al., 2018).

This finding suggests that education raises productivity both in the market and at home, and that when norms impose a minimum standard of home production, educated women's reservation wages can rise (Afridi et al., 2024a). This shows that unpaid home production is a valued economic activity, and that when substitutes for women’s time—childcare, eldercare, safe transport, prepared food, reliable domestic services, clean fuel, and piped water—are scarce or expensive, the market wage needed to pull women into paid

work is high, especially in contexts where women are considered the main providers of these services.

The scale of this asymmetry is visible in the time-use data. India's Time Use Survey 2024 records that women spend about 236 minutes a day on unpaid domestic services for the household against just 24 minutes for men—more than ten times as much (National Statistical Office, 2025). This ratio is high even by the standards of other unequal societies. In most OECD economies women perform roughly twice as much unpaid work as men, and across the Asia-Pacific the ILO estimates a ratio closer to four. When the home-production load is this unequal and its substitutes this thin, the wedge between home and market work is correspondingly large.

Norms also operate through marriage markets. Evidence shows that working women receive less interest from male suitors, and the penalty is larger when the work is in more male-typed occupations (Afridi et al., 2025). This reveals an equilibrium in which families may invest in women's education but still penalise visible labor-market attachment, especially if work signals independence, or reduced household availability.

Autonomy and control over income can change these constraints, but again not mechanically. Research shows that exposure to the Hindu Succession Act increased women's labor supply and autonomy, especially into higher-paying jobs (Heath and Tan, 2020). Giving women direct control over public-sector wages through bank accounts, direct deposit, and training increased work in both public and private-sector jobs and shifted gender norms over time (Field et al., 2021). These studies reinforce a general theme: household bargaining power is not separate from labor supply; it is one of its determinants.

Research has documented related mechanisms. Status concerns and caste hierarchies are associated with lower women's market work in rural India with upper caste women less likely to be employed (Eswaran et al., 2013). In fact, social norms constrain women's employment across developing countries (Jayachandran, 2021). But what are these social norms? How do we define them and think about them in the Indian context? Recent work helps pin this down. Studying a large household survey across seven districts of West Bengal, Deshpande and Kabeer find that the norm that matters most is not religion or the practice of veiling but women's disproportionate responsibility for routine domestic and care work, which sharply lowers their probability of doing paid work (Deshpande and Kabeer, 2024).

How do we change such social norms if these continue to bind our women? Evidence from school-based gender-attitudes training in India can shift adolescent attitudes in a more gender-equal direction, with effects persisting after the intervention but long-term employment outcomes remain unaffected (Dhar et al., 2022). Related interventions to change family attitudes through videos find no detectable change in employment, reminding us that norms are not easily moved by light-touch persuasion (Dean and Jayachandran, 2019). What has been shown to move them is communication within the household. A field experiment in rural India shows that training married women in persuasive communication raised their labor supply and earnings by close to 60% over the following year but only for women who were already more inclined to work than their husbands. The main channel was a change in husbands' preferences rather than a shift in bargaining power (Kala and McKelway, 2025). Norms, in short, are bound up with whose preferences prevail inside the home.

If the home is where many of these constraints bind, then relaxing the care burden ought to help and the evidence suggests it can, though not automatically. Synthesising 22 quasi-experimental and randomised studies across low- and middle-income countries, a recent review finds that all but one find a positive effect on women's employment either higher participation, longer hours, or better-quality work (Halim et al., 2023). A policy review of nine randomized evaluations in eight low- and middle-income countries reaches a similar conclusion: access to childcare can improve women's economic work outcomes but impacts are muted when other constraints such as weak labor demand, restrictive norms, or low trust in care quality remain binding (J-PAL Policy Insight, 2023). In India specifically, a cluster-randomised daycare programme in rural Rajasthan modestly increased the likelihood that women were paid in cash and spent time on paid work (Nandi et al., 2020). But design is decisive: public anganwadis offer only a few hours of care, and the crèches mandated at public-works sites have largely failed to materialise, so the labor-supply response depends on whether childcare hours match the hours that jobs actually require and the quality of care provided.

These same constraints also shape which jobs women are willing to take flexible, home-based work is preferred by women. Not only can offering such jobs increase their employment in the short run but they can also be a "gateway," making women more likely to accept outside-the-home work several months later (Ho et al., 2024). A further, costly consequence of these dynamics is the career break: by industry estimates, around seven million women in India have taken a break from work and are seeking to return, and as we find the labor market penalises them heavily when they try (Mahajan and Nandhini, 2024).

Mobility and safety are another central part of the supply-side story. Women are willing to trade off college quality for safer commutes (Borker, 2021). Local media reports of sexual assault reduce women's employment outside the home in urban India (Siddique, 2022). Experimental evidence shows that women-only transport can more than double job applications (Garlick et al., 2025), and that even small distances and village-boundary norms can sharply reduce women's training participation (Cheema et al., 2019). These studies imply that safety and mobility are not a residual welfare concern. These are critical infrastructure for well-functioning labor markets.

Supply constraints also operate through search and information. We studied gendered language in Indian job advertisements and showed that job ads explicitly and implicitly signal gendered expectations, and that women respond to these signals (Chaturvedi et al., 2025). Female-coded language is often attached to lower-return jobs, while male-coded language is associated with travel, irregular hours, or higher-return positions. This contributes to gendered sorting even before employers make interview decisions. The job market, in this sense, speaks in a gendered language.

Search frictions are also gendered through networks and technology. Because informal referrals remain a dominant channel of hiring in India, the structure of women's social networks matters, and these networks are far more family- and neighbourhood-centric than men's. In a study of low-income neighbourhoods in Delhi, about 96% of married women's peer ties were with non-co-resident relatives and neighbours, against roughly 56% for their husbands, so women have systematically fewer connections who are employed and able to pass on information about vacancies (Afridi et al., 2023b). The digital alternative is unevenly available: recent NSO Comprehensive Modular Survey for Telecom (2025) shows

that among persons aged 15 and above, 56.2% of women owned a mobile phone, compared with 83.9% of men. Even when a smartphone is available, how effectively it is used for job search across genders remains unknown. Access and inability to use it effectively could blunt a tool that could otherwise bring access to opportunities for women.

Finally, supply-side constraints become demand-side penalties. We examined women returning to work after career breaks and an audit study experiment showed that women who report a career break receive 49% fewer callbacks than observationally similar women without a break (Mahajan and Nandhini, 2024). Policies that encourage women to re-enter may fail if employers treat non-employment spells as signals of lower attachment or depreciated skill. Re-entry support must therefore be paired with employer-side incentives and credible pathways back into jobs.

Demand: Where will the jobs come from?

But can we really increase women's employment without a demand-side transformation? India's overall jobs challenge is severe. The Economic Survey notes that over the past two decades India's per-capita income grew at about 5% per year, while employment grew at only 1.6% per year, and that the economy needs roughly 8 million non-farm jobs annually until 2030 to allow for a reasonable degree of structural transformation (Gulati et al., 2025). Structural transformation has also been unbalanced: agriculture's share of GDP fell from 36% in 1980-81 to 16% in 2023-24, while services rose from 38% to 50%; yet agriculture still employs about 40% of the workforce, services 32 percent, manufacturing and construction 13-14% each (Gulati et al., 2025). This is not a classic path of labor-intensive industrialisation.

The comparison with export-led employment episodes elsewhere is instructive. An experiment in rural India showed that information and recruiting services for business-process-outsourcing jobs affected young women's employment, schooling, marriage, and fertility decisions (Jensen, 2012). Similarly, research shows that the growth of the garment sector in Bangladesh increased girls' schooling, delayed marriage and childbirth, and expanded employment for older girls (Heath and Mobarak, 2015). These studies show that when credible and good jobs are available, households respond. Aspirations are endogenous to opportunity.

The gender consequences of this structural pattern are large. In our research on rural India we show that tractor-driven tilling is a male task, but it reduces demand for weeding, which is disproportionately done by women. This played an important role in reducing agricultural jobs for women during 1999–2011. With no compensating increase in women's non-farm employment, their employment rate fell (Afridi et al., 2023a). This result is not an argument against technology. It is an argument that technological change is gendered when tasks are gendered and when alternative jobs are unavailable.

Demand constraints are not confined to agriculture. In urban and non-farm labor markets, the quality of job creation matters. Urban women's labor force participation in India stagnated despite rising growth, education, and wages, partly because sectors that employ women expanded least (Klasen and Pieters, 2015). Recent evidence shows that local labor demand and structural transformation are central to explaining the decline in women's participation (Deshpande and Singh, 2024).

Two points follow. First, sectors matter, because some kinds of work are far more accessible to women than others. Goldin's

account of long-run development describes a U-shaped relationship between growth and female participation, in which women re-enter paid work only once the economy generates white-collar and service jobs compatible with prevailing norms, and in which rising female education must be matched by an expansion of suitable jobs rather than substitute for it (Goldin, 2006). Second, beyond the sector, the nature of the job matters: Goldin shows that much of the residual gender gap in the developed countries reflects the premium paid for long, rigid, "greedy" hours, which penalises whoever carries the household's domestic responsibilities (Goldin, 2014).

One factor which has received the least consideration in the literature is the role played by firm size. India's firm-size distribution is extraordinarily skewed: 98% of Indian firms have fewer than 10 workers, and such firms employ about 75% of the non-agricultural workforce. In my ongoing work, we show that women's relative employment rises with firm size. Using firm and individual-level data, we document a positive relationship between firm size and female employment; exploiting state-level labor-law threshold reforms, we find that treated states experienced a 4.2% increase in female worker share, together with increases in employment and output (Chakraborty and Mahajan, 2026). Why does firm size matter? We show that larger firms are more likely to provide amenities valued more by women workers. These include written contracts, maternity benefits, transport, and childcare. The policy implication is that enabling firms to grow is a pro-women policy. If the modal Indian firm remains tiny, informal, and unable to provide amenities, women's employment will remain constrained even if women are educated and willing to work.

Female entrepreneurship is another demand-side channel. India has many women who are self-employed, but far fewer who run

growing enterprises. The Sixth Economic Census reports that 8.05 million of 58.5 million establishments were run by women, or 13.76 percent, and that 83.19% of women-owned establishments operated without hired workers (Economic Census, 2013). A NITI Aayog report similarly notes that most women-owned enterprises are single-person microenterprises and that only about 17% employ workers (NITI Aayog, 2023). Research shows that female entrepreneurs hire more women and that relaxing barriers to female entrepreneurship can have multiplier effects on female labor force participation (Chiplunkar and Goldberg, 2024). Thus, women entrepreneurs are not only a supply-side story of self-employment; they are a demand-side route to creating jobs for other women.

Overall, with weak aggregate job creation, conservative beliefs about who has first claim on scarce work kick in. In the Pew Research Center's 2019 survey, about 80% of Indian respondents agreed that "when jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women". This is among the highest shares recorded anywhere (Pew Research Center, 2020). Thus, creating jobs is one of the most important levers to expand economic opportunities for women in the country.

Institutional context: Regulations that misfire

Protective regulation must also be evaluated by its equilibrium effects. Trade liberalisation reduced women's employment share in establishments exposed to output-tariff reductions, partly because firms shifted towards greater capital intensity, while women faced legal restrictions on long hours and night work (Gupta, 2021). Our recent work shows that lifting night-shift bans in Indian factories increased female employment, especially in large firms, export-oriented industries, and tighter labor markets (Gupta et al., 2025). We study the POSH Act's mandate requiring internal complaints

committees in workplaces above a size threshold. The evidence suggests that the mandate may have reduced women's relative wage employment in regulated enterprises and intensified gender segregation, even if it improved redressal conditions for some women (Bhalotra et al., 2026).

The same logic applies to maternity protection. India's Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017 extended employer-financed paid maternity leave from 12 to 26 weeks for eligible women in covered establishments. Exploiting the fact that the mandate applied to establishments with ten or more workers, Bose and Chatterjee (2024) find that the reform reduced women's probability of regular salaried employment in covered establishments by 4.3 percentage points, with offsetting increases in casual wage work and unpaid work. This does not imply that maternity protection is undesirable. Rather, the cross-country lesson is that leave policies are more likely to support women's employment when they are job-protected but moderate in duration, publicly or socially financed rather than borne entirely by the marginal employer, and designed as parental rather than mother-only entitlements (Ruhm, 1998; Olivetti and Petrongolo, 2017; International Labour Organization, 2014; Patnaik, 2019). The lesson is not to weaken protections. It is to design protections so that firms cannot respond by hiring fewer women.

It is also worth asking the converse question: which policies have actually raised women's participation? The most consistent evidence points to interventions that either lower the cost of women's home time or widen the set of safe, reachable jobs. Public-works employment is the clearest domestic example. India's rural employment guarantee, which reserves a third of its work for women at equal wages, raised women's participation and casual-labor wages by more for women than for men (Azam, 2012). Yet

the same guarantee can substitute for women as "added workers" and, by insuring household income, reduce married women's market participation accounting, on one estimate, for up to a third of a recent decline in rural female participation (García, 2024). Infrastructure that substitutes for women's domestic time has comparable potential: rural electrification raised women's employment in other developing settings (Dinkelman, 2011), and India's clean-cooking-fuel programme produced modest gains in women's employment alongside larger gains in autonomy (Nandwani and Jain, 2024). Finally, transport that makes jobs reachable and safe can move the demand side directly: the staged expansion of the Delhi Metro reshaped the local composition of firms towards larger, consumer-facing establishments that hire more women, raising female employment near stations (Kovvuri and Sharma, 2025), echoing experimental evidence that women-only transport sharply raises job applications (Garlick et al., 2025).

Conclusion: Escaping the bad equilibrium

To sum up, supply, demand and institutional levers generally work together and not in silos. Women face constraints at home due to care and domestic work, have lower mobility, invest in gender-typed skills, and specialize in home production. Firms observe fewer women in the labor market, so they invest less in amenities, design jobs around male workers, or view women's attachment as uncertain. Scarcity of good jobs for women, unsafe, distant workplaces with poor transportation where they exist restrict the work options for women. Policymakers see low female employment and respond with programs that target one margin at a time: training without jobs, protection without cost-sharing, creches without quality and jobs, and entrepreneurship without scale. Each intervention may help at the margin (and sometimes even backfire), so the equilibrium persists.

What would a big push look like? First, reduce the opportunity cost of women's time at home through credible childcare, safe hostels, public transport, clean energy, and basic urban safety. Access to piped water and gas is not enough; there has to be a reliable supply of water and continuous subsidization of gas for lower-income households. Second, create demand for women's labor by expanding labor-intensive manufacturing and modern services, by allowing productive firms to grow, and by making compliance predictable rather than punitive. Women's low employment rate is also a jobs problem. Trade and industrial policies therefore become important instruments for enabling non-farm enterprises to enter, grow, and create better employment opportunities.

Third, redesign skilling around actual demand and job placement, not only enrolment targets. Fourth, support women-owned firms to hire workers, access credit, enter supply chains, and grow beyond single-person enterprises. Fifth, evaluate protective legislation with the same seriousness with which we evaluate any economic policy: protect women from harassment and unsafe work, but socialize the cost of compliance.

The historian of economic thought in me returns to Keynes's warning: the difficulty lies not so much in developing new ideas as in escaping from old ones (Keynes, 1936). The old idea is that women's employment is mainly a matter of women's willingness to work. The evidence tells us that willingness is only one part of a much larger system. Women's work depends on household technologies, marriage markets, public safety, occupational language, search frictions, firm growth, and the sectoral composition of development.

For India, the stakes are both growth and equity. An economy cannot be considered developed if half its talent is rationed into

unpaid work or low-productivity self-employment. Nor can gender equality be achieved if women remain confined to the home while men alone claim the rewards of paid work. The task is to build an economy in which women's work is not an exception, not a signal of family distress, not a risk to respectability, not a liability to employers, and not a policy afterthought. In fact, whether India is able to move the needle on women's employment is perhaps a test for the quality of India's structural transformation.

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A Profile

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Kanika Mahajan is an Associate Professor of Economics at Ashoka University. Her research lies at the intersection of development economics, labour economics, gender, firms, and public policy in India. A central strand of her work examines why women's employment in India remains low, examining both supply-side constraints within households and demand-side constraints in labour markets and firms. She also works on firm growth, trade disruptions and environmental shocks.

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